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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews a small sampling of recent research-supported method studies that were consistent with the prominent current philosophical practice in English-as-a-Second-Language/English-as-a-Foreign-Language (ESL/EFL) reading education. It focuses on the following: The Advent of Whole Language in ESL/EFL Study; Teaching from a Constructivist Perspective; Constructivist Reading: An Interactive Process; and Student-Centered, Teacher-Moderated, Text-Rich Approach. The paper concludes that there is enormous support for a whole language approach to ESL/EFL reading education, with very few studies disagreeing with whole language or constructivism. A strong majority of educators doing research in the field have adopted this view, and all of the classroom methods they advocate share common elements related to certain general principles (integration of reading as a component of language along with writing, speaking, and listening; a constructivist approach in reading instruction that builds on students' prior knowledge of and experience with language; the idea of reading as an interactive process between text and reader to build meaning; and the advocacy of a learning situation that is student centered but teacher monitored in a text-rich environment). (Contains 22 references.) (SM)

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Current Philosophy & Practice in ESL/EFL Reading Education: An Analysis

-David Meredith

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Introduction

In recent years, especially with a great influx of non-English speaking foreign and immigrant students attending American public schools, English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching methods have begun to figure prominently in a number of political circles as well as in educational research journals. Also, in the twentieth century and on into the twenty first century, English has become more and more the de facto lingua franca of diplomacy and business worldwide, raising the demand for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) training and instruction internationally. Given this high level of interest in ESL/EFL teaching and methodology, both domestically and abroad, there was a considerable amount of research on the subject.

In wading through this virtual input overload of information, as it were, certain trends and consensuses do emerge however. It is about these general trends in ESL/EFL reading education theory that this paper will attempt to relate. Within the writing on the topic there was indeed remarkable consistency of opinion in broad concepts regarding ESL/EFL education, (although there was in fact at least a small minority of opposition). There are a variety of opinions as to which actual in-class teaching methods and approaches prove to be optimal. However, most of these seemed largely compatible with each other, and in many situations a number of the strategies that were reviewed could in fact be used in concert with or supplemented by additional methods. It is the purpose of this paper to describe the broad philosophical ideas on which ESL/EFL education seems to currently rest, to describe some of the many statistically relevant, recent ESL/EFL reading pedagogical practice studies that exist within that philosophy, and to examine

the arguments of the few educators and researchers who seem to disagree with those views.

It is hoped that the final result will be a research-supported, broad-brush view of current ESL/EFL teaching theory and practice, particularly as it pertains to reading instruction. It should be noted that especially in the area of in-class methodology, the review of this paper is not intended to be exhaustive, but rather a small sampling of recent research-supported method studies that were consistent with the prominent philosophical practice of today. In reviewing the literature, this practice seemed to rest on a Whole Language approach to reading education that stressed integration of reading with writing, speaking, and listening, a constructivist approach to the teaching of reading, the idea of reading as an interaction between text and reader to construct various levels of individualized meaning, and a learning situation that is student centered but teacher moderated in a text-rich environment.

The Advent of Whole Language in ESL/EFL Study

Patzelt described Whole Language as an approach to learning that views language as a whole entity, and that writing, speaking, reading, and listening should be integrated when learned, (1995). In this view reading is an integral part of any sort of learning (Gonzalez-Jensen & Beckett, 2002), but it would be a mistake to treat it as divorced in any way from the other properties of language. Hao & Sivell argued that none of the four communication skills could be learned alone, (2002), and Patzelt further asserted, "When language is broken down into separate skills, the learner can neither appreciate nor comprehend it fully, (1995, p.4).

In similar manner did all of the reading stress that teaching reading in isolation should be discouraged. Whenever the skill of reading was separated from the act of real communication it often lost viability and legitimacy in the minds of the students, complicating the education process. However, when reading was simply presented as a component of learning real communication skills, which the students saw as relevant, it effectively reinforced and was reinforced by the other three factors in language learning. This is the gist of Whole Language.

Patzelt (1995) especially had a lot to say about Whole Language learning in general. In particular, she sited Rose, (1989) who worked with war veterans in Los Angeles learning English as a Second Language. These men were typically of low performing academic backgrounds, not having enjoyed much scholastic success previously. Rose found early on that traditional second language teaching methods (i.e. translation based methods), were proving to be ineffective. However, in his study of these individuals he arrived at several conclusions with important implications for ESL/EFL education. Rose concluded, "...concentrating on the particulars of language—schoolbook grammar, mechanics, usage—would tremendously restrict the scope of what language use was all about...My students needed to be immersed in talking, reading, and writing, they needed to further develop their ability to think critically, and they needed to gain confidence in themselves as systematic inquirers," (1989, p143). This view acted in effect as a rebuttal of classical second language methodology, viewing communication as the ultimate goal of study rather than perfectly grammatical reproduction and translation. Patzelt (1995) interpreted it as a directive to focus on meaning rather than grammatical correctness and also recognized that the instruction of language went far beyond the

teaching of grammatical rules and rote memorization of dictionary definitions of vocabulary. Rather, language was a medium of communication and as long as communication effectively took place, whether or not it was in standard or non-standard form, grammatical correctness was of infinitely lesser importance. This seemed to be a consistent view in the vast majority of the articles reviewed.

There were only a few dissenting voices on this view that were found and none of these totally abandoned the philosophy of Whole Language. Jones (1996) conducted a study of adult ESL learners who were migrant workers and laborers of native Spanish speaking background. The purpose of the study was to determine whether or not phonics was an effective teaching technique for ESL/EFL instruction. In this study she stressed learning phonics, English letter name recognition, and spelling as crucial, prerequisite skills in acquiring emergent literacy, openly discounting the idea of meaning based instruction and the validity of the text-rich environment concept. She argued, "The reading process is driven by the visual recognition of individual letters in familiar ordered sequences and is critically supported by the translation of those strings of letters into their phonological correspondences," (p.12). She also argued that there was no published research indicating the effectiveness of a text-rich environment approach with her adult education students, who as unskilled laborers, were exposed to print only a few hours a week in the classroom. This argument seemed to be effective against the practicality of a text-rich approach in certain situations, but did not seem to specifically address the concept's validity. In addition, her argument included a large number of assumptions that seemed to render this study ungeneralizeable to the general population of ESL/EFL learners or even the general population of adult ESL/EFL learners.

The first of these included the assumption that English spoken knowledge would be greater than written knowledge. This may not in fact always be the case, especially with East Asian students, where translation based English is usually a compulsory subject in grade school, (Inoue, 1999). In these cases the students' written English and English reading ability may be considerably more advanced than their spoken English and listening comprehension skills. She also relied on the students' ability to utilize cognates, (i.e. *attencion*=attention), to identify the meanings of unknown English words. This is only useful, to a large degree, if the student speaks a language that actually contains a significant number of cognates with English, such as Romantic or Germanic languages. Otherwise, this suggestion is most likely of only very limited utility.

In her study the author actually relied on a number of Whole Language principles, like constructivism, to make her case. Thus her argument is not a full rejection of the concept. However, she advocated a rather narrow focus on the instruction of phonics as an integral part of reading education. Where the instruction of phonics may indeed be beneficial as the author suggests (Goodman mentions it as one of the key cuing systems for transactional reading, [1994]), the other research refutes her rather sound-reproduction (as apposed to meaning) based view of reading. Also because her assumptions about ESL/EFL students are based on a very narrow population of learners, the results of her study can probably not be generalized to any other ESL/EFL populations.

Teaching From a Constructivist Perspective

Another prominently espoused view was that reading should be taught from a constructivist perspective. Patzelt stressed learner constructed educational experiences whereby materials are authentic, (stressing trade materials rather than basal textbooks), and meaningful for the student, (in that they can be related to the students' personal experiences), (1995). Gonzalez & Beckett stated that ESL students "...need to practice reading a variety of kinds of information," (2002, p.4). This is necessary because different styles of text warrant different strategies to construct an effective understanding, and achieve different goals, (Goodman, 1994). For school age ESL students in particular, the ability to read and comprehend a variety of different kinds of text is instrumental to their scholastic success in other subjects. Thus, from a practical standpoint, for ESL students this ability may the most important to be taught in their reading instruction.

In regards to constructivism, most of the literature approached ESL/EFL reading education from the standpoint that students came into language learning situations with a certain amount of prior experience and knowledge, language related or otherwise, which inherently effected their construction of meaning from text and ability to effectively learn language in general. Patzelt wrote, "Learning is built upon the real experiences and background knowledge of the learner," (1995, p.3). Quiroga et al. based their entire study on the fact that ESL learners come into the classroom environment with prior phonological awareness which could be used to teach English reading, (2002), as did Jones (1996), though it should be noted that she did not consider herself a proponent of the theory of Whole Language, as mentioned previously. Finally, Goodman's whole theory rested on the fact that readers bring prior experience into the exchange between

reader and text, which influenced meaning, (1994). In short, the literature consistently showed the import and validity of constructivist approaches to reading education, especially in an ESL/EFL context.

Constructivist Reading: An Interactive Process

A third important view on the subject is that reading should also be viewed as an interaction between the reader and the text. Patzelt stated in her paper, "The expression of meaning is the most important goal of any language activity," (1995, p.4). In relation to ESL/EFL language education this tends to shift the focus from reading as a product to reading as a process (Cheng, 1999). Chi stated that meaning has been construed to come not only from written documents, but also from the interactions between the reader and the text," (2002). Goodman was also in agreement saying, "The writer constructs a text with a meaning potential that will be used by readers to construct their own meaning," (1994, p.1094). Senghal asserted that reading was a meaning making process through which readers employ strategies to facilitate comprehension," (1998). Additionally, Inoue saw reading is an active skill that involved guessing, predicting, checking, and asking questions of oneself, (1998). And so it continued. It seemed that a vast majority of the articles were in agreement with this view as well.

In his paper, Goodman made the case for a constructivist approach whereby the act of reading is not a direct transmission of information from author to text to learner, but rather an interactive process between reader and text, whereby the reader constructs an individualized meaning based on a written representation of the author's intended meaning, (1994). His basic theory was that the reader used symbolic cues from the text to

assemble meaning. This was done based on what the text actually said, the prior experiences of the reader which influenced the meaning that was derived from the text, and the attitude the reader took when initiating the reading process, which may have been heavily based on expectations before reading, as well as context clues that suggested what type of text was being read. As the reader read, a number of cognitive strategies and cycles were employed to continue progress through the material and even to decide if the process continued or not.

This seemed to be the definitive work on constructivist reading that was reviewed. In all of the other readings there was not one that raised a serious challenge to Goodman's view. Even though Goodman's theory was proposed to deal with reading in a general sense, all of the writers on the topic of ESL/EFL instruction and education that have been covered in this paper utilized at least some amount of his theory in their studies and a good number of them sited his work directly. This uniformity of agreement throughout a large number of varied ESL/EFL reading studies supports the validity of an interactive understanding of and constructionist approach to reading.

A Student-Centered, Teacher-Moderated, Text-Rich Approach

Finally, the view that reading in ESL/EFL education should be taught in an environment that is student centered, teacher moderated, and text-rich, also seemed to be widely proscripted by the literature. Singhal advocated requiring students to be actively involved with the development of reading strategies as a class and individually, (1998). This study was particularly interesting because the author felt that consciously teaching students to evaluate and improve their cognitive strategies of deriving meaning from a

text would make them better readers. It dealt with having students specifically identify strategies that they might use and how these could then be used to acquire different levels of meaning from a given text.

In this study the author seemed particularly interested in what Safi referred to as Asian "traditional learners"(1996). These were students who were highly intelligent but suffered from a sort of "vocabulary anxiety" and overused their dictionaries, rather than employ strategies to derive meaning from context while reading. Crismore echoed this view in bemoaning the fact that international students in particular seemed to lack the ability to analyze text critically, (2000), which is a deeper level of understanding than simple word identification.

This is not to suggest that the learning of vocabulary is unimportant. Hippner-Page in her study about Semantic vs. Thematic clustering of vocabulary words stated, "Vocabulary development is an essential component of successfully acquiring a second language," (2000, p.7). Peyton & Rigg also observed that everyday language was easier to read and comprehend than literary language, (1999). Taken together, this can at least partly be attributed to the point that Crow & Quigly (1985) raised, as sited by Hippner-Page (2000), that it requires only about 2000 words to function effectively in conversation, but 150,000 words to read smoothly and fluently. This suggests that becoming a competent reader is a much more involved process for ESL/EFL students than becoming a competent speaker of English. Therefore, this large gap must be covered, at least to some extent, by express vocabulary study if increased reading proficiency is a goal.

The problem with an overly dictionary focused approach however, said Senghal (1998), was that for advanced students, it only allowed the development of very limited, literal understandings about a given text. She also maintained that there had been numerous studies that demonstrated a relationship between highly proficient readers and the number of reading strategies that they employed. Thus by teaching students what reading strategies were and allowing them a hand in producing a list of strategies through class discussion and agreement, guided by the teacher, she believed they would be better able to deal with complex text on multiple levels of meaning beyond the basic dictionary definition of words.

Senghal also advocated an individualized approach and emphasized the use of content that was largely self-selected and of interest to the students. This was because, she asserted, "When students are interested in the content, it provides them with the motivation and purpose to read," (1998, p.14). Inoue also echoed this point, (1998). Senghal did caution however, that teachers should monitor which readings are chosen by students so that it adequately challenged them but was not too difficult. Her study met with positive results, was consistent with the Whole Language ideals of student centered learning and the construction of meaning for understanding, and was an optimal example of the practical use of a student focused, teacher guided approach.

Schiavone also advocated that students self-select their texts, (1999). Sandhu encouraged her ESL students to self-identify weaknesses in their reading, (2000). The purpose of encouraging student involvement with their own education was that if students were active in creating and participating in their own learning experiences, then those experiences would be more memorable and interesting, facilitating better understanding

through personal connectedness to the material and increased motivation to pursue English study.

In classical views of education, to contrast, this was not the case. The teacher was seen almost as an oracle, doling out the benefits of his or her knowledge to the ill-deserving, unwashed masses. This view has been largely discounted by research of the past twenty years or so which showed that approach to be largely ineffective, acting as a demotivating force in the classroom. In recent years the role and purpose of the classroom teacher of language has been redefined. Patzelt stated, "The role of the Whole Language teacher is that of a facilitator or collaborator who guides the learner by providing an environment filled with language," (1995, p.5). The majority of the literature saw the teacher in more of a moderator type role, rather than as a pontificating doler-out-of-knowledge. This ensures that learning remains student centered, interesting, and personally meaningful.

In regard to the view that text-rich environments, (classroom situations where students are confronted with many and varied reading opportunities), were beneficial, Machet & Olen sited research that a "book flood" approach would cause "rapid improvements" in reading for ESL students, (1996, p.5) and Chien argued, "…a print-rich environment helps children to develop emergent literacy," (2000, p.3). Hippner-Page also touted this concept because it facilitated new words being acquired through incidental learning, (2000).

To some, the idea that to become a better reader you need to read more may seem painfully obvious. However, text-rich approaches are still not effectively practiced by many classroom teachers, who still tend to rely on basal texts rather than having students

read a variety of authentic trade materials. Even most ESL/EFL teachers who do use non-textbook sources, according to Chien, "carefully select reading texts…based on a structure oriented arrangement. And then unfortunately most authentic stories…are withheld until appropriate grammar rules are taught," (2000, p.4). The literature seemed overwhelmingly positive toward the text-rich view of ESL/EFL reading education. In fact, the only paper that expressed doubt about the idea of utilizing a text-rich environment approach was Jones (1996), as was mentioned in a previous section, and the concerns about that paper's assertions have already been addressed. However, the research also suggested that currently there is a very large gap between theory and practice in ESL/EFL reading education, which needs to be addressed.

Conclusion

The conclusion that one could draw from the literature is then one of enormous support for a Whole Language approach to ESL/EFL reading education. There was a great deal of uniformity in the support for this view, with only a very few dissenting opinions, and it should be noted that even these did not 100% divorce themselves from Whole Language or constructivism. In general, though in certain areas there may still be gaps between theory and practice, it seemed that an incredibly strong majority of educators doing research in the field have adopted this view and all of the classroom methods that they advocated shared common elements, related to certain general principles. These included the integration of reading as an component of language along with writing, speaking, and listening, a constructivist approach in reading instruction that builds on students' prior knowledge of and experience with language, the idea of reading

as an interactive process between text and reader to build meaning, and the advocacy of a learning situation that is student centered but teacher moderated in a text-rich environment. Thus, unless there is remarkable new research that shows the contrary, when deciding on formal classroom methods and techniques for teaching ESL/EFL reading skills, teachers should realize that there is in fact no single, magic method for teaching the subject, but that any teaching strategy used should be developed and evaluated according to the considerations of a constructivist Whole Language approach to English reading education.

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